

A Review of Dr. A. B. Meyer's "Negritos."

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A pamphlet with the above title has recently been presented to the Library of the S. B. R. A. S. by the author. It is a translation from the German of two chapters of a larger work, published in 1893, dealing with the Negritos of the Philippines, and is confined to a consideration of the distribution of the Negritos within the Philippines and beyond.

The author, who is the Director of the Royal Zoological, Anthropological and Ethnographical Museum at Dresden, is a scientific traveller of established reputation. He has since 1875 published over 20 volumes on Anthropological and Ethnographical subjects connected with the far eastern Archipelago. The subject is one that possesses a particular interest in this "corner of Asia," as amongst the natives of the Peninsula we have tribes representing the ancient race of Pigmy negroes, small black men with frizzy hair concerning whom science has speculated since the time of Herodotus.

Jakuns, Sakai, Semang, Orang Raiat, Orang Bukit, Orang Panggang, Belenda, Bidnanda are some of the names by which these people are known in different parts of the Peninsula. Possibly the Orang Laut, who to this day inhabit the villages at the mouth of the Rochor River, in the harbour of Singapore, and even the curly-headed "have-a-dive" boys of New Harbour are also related to this ancient people, but this is still an open question.

The author concerns himself only with the distribution of the Negritos in the Far East—that is, where these people are to be met with and where not. In support of his arguments he quotes over 200 different authorities, and more often than not, differs from them.

The writers that our author quotes most, and differs from most violently, are MM. de Quatrefages and Hamy, both of them anthropologists of renown. To readers of this Journal, the criticisms of the views of M. de Quatrefages will be of interest, as some of these views are set forth in two articles entitled the "Pigmies" published in Nos. 11 and 13 of the Journal, S. B. R. A. S. Let us take some of these references in detail.

P. 23. "The most prolific writer on the Negritos is de Quatrefages, who published a monograph in the year 1872, entitled "Etude sur les Mincopies et la race Negrito en général" . . . and then in 1882, together with Hamy, the 'Crania Ethnica.'

"I will not enter into a detailed discussion of this writer's partially fantastic ideas on the Negrito question. Time will decide whether the views advanced by him with great certainty will hold good, in that traces of the Negritos are found nearly everywhere from India to Japan and New Guinea, and that Negritos and Papuans live together in New Guinea and elsewhere, owned and intermixed, differing from the true Papuans" The same illustrations too are continually reproduced De Quatrefages' literary references are frequently untrustworthy. He is in spite of his shortcomings respected by many writers as a reliable authority, etc., etc."

The "Crania Ethnica" is a constant stumbling-block and rock of offence to our author. He writes of a certain skull described as coming from Borneo. P. 26. "The mischief caused by this "Negrito skull will be carried on in books for some time to come in consequence of this frequent repetition." He is strongly of opinion that the existence of Negritos in Borneo has not yet been proved, and is much annoyed with M. de Quatrefages for assuming the contrary on the evidence of a solitary skull.

Writing of the Moluccas of Lesser Sunda isles, our author disputes an opinion of Prof. Flower regarding the existence of a "small Negroid population" in certain islands. "He is" he says, "surely adopting, absolutely without the test of criticism, "de Quatrefages' more recent statements (Les Pygmées, 1887) which are more or less figments of de Quatrefages' imagination," etc.

Again (with reference to Negritos in Java), "Flower appears here again to follow de Quatrefages (Pygmées, 1887)

"blindly, but the statements in question are very much open to controversy." As in the case of Borneo, Mr. Meyer holds that the existence of Negritos in Java has not been proved.

In examining the evidence as to Negritos in Formosa, Herr Meyer again falls foul of "*Crania Ethnica*" and writes, "For to conclude the occurrence of a race in a country from certain characters in two skulls, when this race has not yet been registered from that country, is in the present embryonic state of craniology, an unwarrantable proceeding, and the two French writers will certainly find no follower in this respect, except such as simply copy their assertions."

Here Meyer disputes the existence of Negritos in Japan, on the evidence of certain skulls described by Hamy. He writes: "In consequence, this Negritos Japanese skull found its way into the '*Crania Ethnica*' and was duly recorded in all the writings of de Quatrefages and in many others."

As regards China, Herr Meyer equally questions the evidence as to Negritos. "De Quatrefages and de Lacouperie looked upon each other as authorities, the assumption of the one standing for truth to the other, and *vice versa*; in consequence they tried to support each other, but it is more than questionable whether others will have the same belief in the categorical statements of these two writers."

In short, as regards the Dutch possessions, China and Japan, Herr Meyer finds that all accounts of Negritos outside the Philippines are traced on very poor evidence, or properly speaking on none at all. He reminds one of the famous chapter in the "*Natural History of Iceland*" headed "Snakes—There are none." Professor Meyer goes on to discuss the Negritos question as it concerns the Malay Peninsula, the Andamans, the Mergui and Nicobar Islands, Anam, Cochin China, Cambodia, India, Australia, and New Guinea. He glances (p. 72) at the question as to whether we are to regard the Negrito people as the little modified descendants of an extremely ancient race, ("*gens prisca mortalium*") the ancestors of all the Negro tribes, or whether they may be regarded as a type of comparatively recent growth, retrograded to their present condition after centuries of isolation and confinement to a limited space. "For at the present time our knowledge of the mutability and amount of

“variation in organic form and their result is still so inadequate, that it is extremely rash to speculate in this general manner on the genetic connection of races, and doubtless easier to set up a clever hypothesis than to prove its full legitimacy, let alone necessity.”

In his conclusion he deplors the practice of describing skulls in detail “which will never lead to profitable results.” He thus takes a final shot at the “*Crania Ethnica*.” “Whoever wishes to obtain an idea of the chaos which reigns here let him read the ‘*Crania Ethnica*’ of de Quatrefages and Hamy: he would need Ariadne’s clue to find his way in this labyrinth of skull descriptions.”

He appeals to “some able investigator” to dedicate his powers to the Negritos of the Philippines (as the Saranies have done for the Weddas), and hopes that later generations will attain to the “heights of knowledge” and be able to look back to the present time with its gropings in the dark, its daring hypotheses, its paucity of facts, as the childhood of Anthropology.